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BIRDS OF THE COTTONWOOD GROVES

By FLORENCE MERRIAM BAILEY

WITH TWO PHOTOS

WHEN following the old Santa Fe Trail between Santa Fe and the Pecos Mountains, we pitched our tents for a few days' work near Glorieta in a grove of the narrow-leaved elm-like cottonwoods whose slender trunks branch above the tops of the nut pines and junipers of the region, and whose arching willowy branches hang low over a brilliant flower garden; a grove of such rare attractiveness, surrounded as it is by grave conifers, that it is commonly known as The Park, although the Spanish name Glorieta—bower or arbour—seems more appropriate. Imagine the feelings of the old botanical explorers when, after following the Santa Fe Trail over five hundred miles of plains, they arrived at this garden spot! To the ordinary traveler the groves of narrow-leaved cottonwoods, encountered occasionally on the edge of the yellow pine belt, are among the most beautiful spots in the west, where it is often hard to make comparisons in beauty. The delicacy of the foliage gives exquisite effects in the morning sunlight, and almost the effect of beech woods in the moonlight. In this Glorieta of the Santa Fe Trail the wild flower garden under the trees was bright with luxuriant painted cups, lupins, delicate pentstemons in red, purple, and white, and a deep pink phlox that was really a brilliant flower.

The beautiful grove, at the time of our visits—July, 1903—was full of birds. The loud buzzing of the Broad-tailed Hummingbird told of its presence among the flowers, and overhead among the branches the songs of Western House Wrens and Swainson and Plumbeous vireos persisted when all else was quiet. At dusk the calling of poor-wills and the booming of nighthawks was heard. During the day there were the voices of birds from the open country below and those from the edge of the mountain forest above—the *henk, henk*, of the Rocky Mountain Nuthatch and the cheery call of the Mountain Chickadee being mingled with the *tu-whit, tu-whit, tu-whit*, of the Gray Titmouse, the lispings of goldfinches, the

'willow' note of the Red-shafted Flicker, the monotonous mew of the Green-tailed Towhee, the bright song of the Spurred Towhee, the loud calls of Cassin Kingbirds and crested jays, the soft cooing of doves and the harsh croaking of a family of talkative young ravens.

On the edge of the grove in a clump of bushes a Western Chipping Sparrow had a nest, and within the grove were found a number of nesting holes in cottonwood trunks or branches. Of the householders, a pair of Sparrow Hawks were feeding young, two families of jolly excitable Western House Wrens were singing and fluttering their wings with abandon, and a less demonstrative Chestnut-backed Bluebird perched on a few inches of broken branch close to the trunk of a tree, uttering an occasional low sweet warble. At nest holes high up in a tree trunk we were delighted to discover beautiful Violet-green Swallows going in and

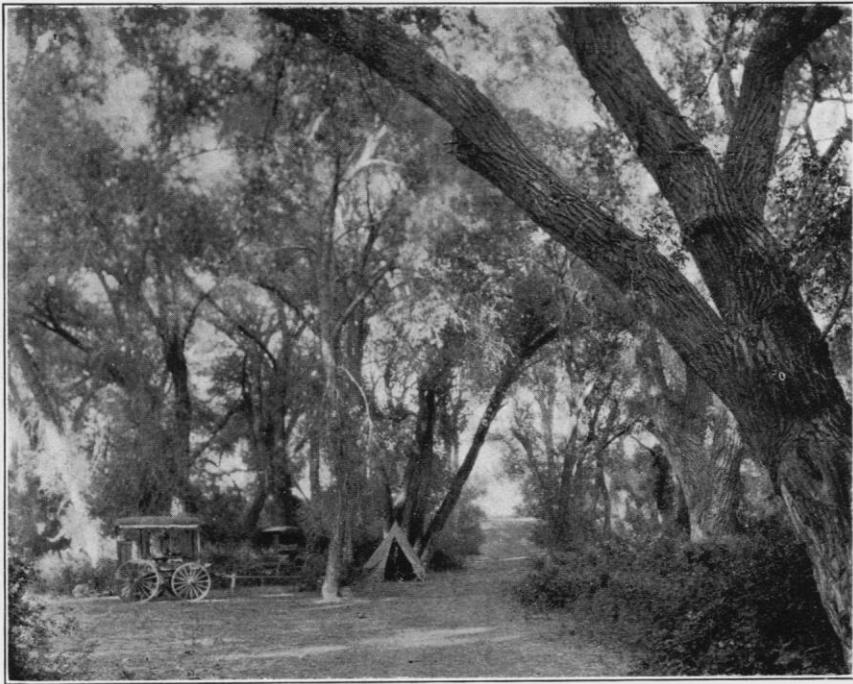


Fig. 42. THE GLORIETA OF THE TAOS INDIANS

Courtesy of Biological Survey

out. It was altogether a most lovely place. Big yellow butterflies fluttered through the delicate foliage of the grove, and before mountain thunder storms radiant white cloud piles were seen through green oriel windows.

Another beautiful park, in which the stately trees spaced a grassy floor, was in the Conejos River bottoms, just across the line in Colorado. We were there in early September, when bands of migrating warblers and their associates often passed through the cottonwood tops. As I stood in the shadow breathlessly watching the approach of one such troop, Long-tailed Chickadees worked slowly along from tree to tree stopping to hang head down over some dainty morsel, Golden Pileolated Warblers whipped about, and Audubons hunted energetically through the branches, while a quiet Townsend sat looking around enquiringly

for its prey; Pygmy Nuthatches chattered softly, vireos sang their leisurely songs, and one hunted so near that its eye-ring, lores, and wing bars stood out conspicuously; while a preoccupied Orange-crowned Warbler coming from the greenery toward the light almost flew against my arm hovering unsuspectingly close to my face. As the busy throng hunted through the cottonwood tops, a pair of Catbirds mewed in the thicket below, and Western House Wrens and Green-tailed Towhees went about their lowly business. Among the visiting migrants one solitary Rocky Mountain Creeper was seen on a cottonwood trunk.

Another grove of the beautiful cottonwoods near the Taos Pueblo, the Glorieta of the Indians, was perhaps the most notable that we saw. The old trees had seamed patriarchal trunks and their high-arching branches carried

their finely cut leafage low to the ground. Many of the great trees had twin trunks, some stood alone, others in brotherly groups. An artist when visiting camp talked enthusiastically of the subtle tints of their bark and the effect of afternoon sunshine permeating their delicately foliated green tops. The cottonwood trunks rose from a dense thicket of undergrowth—scrub oak, juniper, and wild plum, tangled with rose and overgrown with poison ivy and clematis whose festooning vines made banks of green and white bloom. In this thicket in which our camp was a cleared circle, birds abounded. Spurred Towhees scratched among the leaves and flew up to sing on the plum bushes, and one black-headed parent was discovered busily feeding grown young who were following him around teasing with hungry insistence. A small Wright Flycatcher, when not too busy feeding its young in the nest over our tent, kept up a pleasant *see-wick, see-wick, see-wick*, and *swee-hoo*, while a Western Flycatcher reiterated *cat-it, eat-it, eat-it*, and vireos and many other small feathered householders sang and hunted in the shade of the tree tops in the sunny mornings, filling the grove with their delightful music.

A teasing song that I did not recognize, one morning led me into the dense growth bordering the irrigation ditch of the Taos Indians. When whistled to, the invisible bird answered back promptly—or so it seemed—between songs moving about getting his breakfast. But where was he? When finally discovered, his dark gray head and breast were cut off so sharply from the yellow belly that went

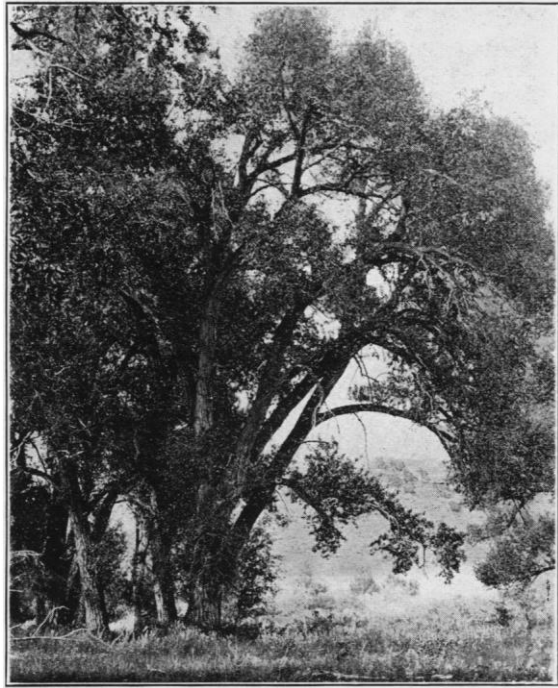


Fig. 43. THE NARROW-LEAFED COTTONWOOD
Courtesy of Biological Survey

with the sunlit branch below, that the only wonder was that *tolmiei* had ever been separated from his background. For it was he, the lovely little Macgillivray Warbler, an old friend of the Sierra and close relative of *philadelphia*, the mourner of the east: a most charming bird, when he sat on a branch in the sun and threw up his head to sing his rich finch-like song. A few days later under the cottonwoods in a dense tangle of wild plum, wild rose, maple, and poison ivy, *tolmiei* was encountered in a still more attractive role. The absorbed musician was now the anxious guardian of the nest. He and his mate with food in their bills circled around the intruder chipping and switching their tails noncommittally. When they passed through a patch of sunlight the green on their backs warmed up prettily, and when the female went to a distance the white spots on her eyelids proved a good mark for an intimate friend to follow. And—there was the nest! Only about a foot above the ground in a small bush overgrown with clematis the pretty cup held four precious but undeniably plain nestlings with fuzzy heads and yellow bills.

In wandering about the grove we sometimes met a secretive pair of birds with a suggestive billful flying swiftly where we could not follow, or found a feathered parent trying to get its unduly trustful young out of our path—among them, robins, wrens, and towhees—and one day—beside the road outside the grove—we were stopped by the pitiful cries of a pair of Catbirds whose last young one had just been killed. Its little headless body was lying in the nest bearing mute testimony to the horrid act of some pitiless prowler. Eastern Catbirds seemed singularly out of place here, among Macgillivray Warblers, Audubon Thrushes, Black-headed Grosbeaks, Mountain Bluebirds, Violet-green Swallows, and other westerners, but they were near the limit of their southwestern range.

Near the edge of the grove a Red-naped Sapsucker whose family were out of the nest was seen a number of times flying from a stub diagonally to the ground where, on investigation, there proved to be a colony of ants.

Outside the grove the arid sagebrush flat dotted with piñon pine and juniper marked off by the water line of the creek and its irrigation ditches offered congenial homes for the Woodhouse Jay and the green towhee; and a stealthy brooding green towhee with rufous crown and white chin much to our delight was caught slipping from her nest in a clematis-clad sagebush near the ground. About the clumps of red gilia bordering the woods, Broad-tailed Hummingbirds whizzed noisily, darting off with such lightning speed that they were not followed home. Goldfinches often passed over, and one party consisting of a male and several females flew down to a cliff rose and the male began tweaking out the long-tailed carpels of *cercocarpus*.

From the sagebrush we looked up over the foothills to the timbered mountains above, the old hunting grounds of the Taos Indians, and from the ridges and the canyons in the evenings came the familiar *peent* of nighthawks, and that most deliciously soothing note of western twilights, *poor-will*, *poor-will*, *poor-will*, *poor-will-low*.